

young midas

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young midas

by [apolloalliums](#)

Summary

Phil looked around as he sat on the edge of the step beside him. "An odd place to run if you're trying to get away from everything, don't you think?"

"Ve you ever heard the story of King Midas, Phil?" Wilbur pinched a cigarette between his fingers, embers glowing. "A king who could turn everything he touched to gold."

- Inspired by [take this compass, follow it home](#) by [lightning_anon](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

"This job and everything. it's real?" He left room for Phil to answer, but the man only seemed more confused. "This isn't setup for some kind of practical joke or something?"

Phil frowned at that. "No, of course not. Why - why would you think that?"

Wilbur shrugged. "People have done more for less."

Chapter Notes

CWs: paranoia, anxiety, body image issues, wilbur has no faith in himself

if you wanna hear me talk about the fic and the larger AHFW universe, feel free to find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)!

A boy stood anxiously in front of a bar. Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, right?

The boy shifted his weight from foot to foot, heels resting on the flaking, painted edge of the curb. He gnawed on the inside of his cheek as he stared up at the building. It was intimidating: gray stucco with black and white trim, all alternating depending on placement. A nearly floor-to-ceiling window comprising a majority of the building's front wall. Flyers taped haphazardly to the inside of the glass closest to the front door, edging out from a pathetic excuse of a *WE'RE HIRING!* SIGN. The poor thing was just a giant piece of giant white construction paper, words scribbled on with the wide edge of a blue highlighter, barely hanging on by three measly pieces of scotch tape. The cherry on top? The establishment's name flickered in red, neon cursive in the empty space above the window. The name *Wanderer's Hideaway* blinked an ominous reflection on the wet pavement below the boy's feet.

He caught sight of his reflection in the window, frowning. A pale, string bean of a boy stared back at him, lips downturned. Mussed brunette curls laid a mess atop his head. Glasses sat crooked on his nose. The sweater he'd managed to hang onto for so long had become littered with loose threads and unsightly snags. The hems of his pant legs sat frayed under the heels of ratty, old Converse. A half-empty backpack hung off his back, its fabric a near match for the gray of the sky above. Who was he kidding? He had no shot at getting this job, especially as a teenager with a complete lack of experience and no resume.

He had just about convinced himself it was over before it began when the front door of the establishment swung open, a bell jingling. A man with shoulder-length blonde hair stepped out, door yawning behind him as he pushed it open further. "You alright, mate?" Despite the boy not making a single move, the stranger continued to hold the door open, a green cardigan splayed out behind him like a pair of wings.

The teenager blinked. "Yeah. Uh, am I-" Fumbling, he abruptly pointed to the sign in the window. "You're hiring."

The blonde smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. "We are."

A beat passed and the boy made no more, arms hanging lamely at his sides.

"Why don't you come inside?" The man suggested, smile kind. The boy tried not to read into it too much. "It looks like it's gonna rain again, and catching a cold out here doesn't sound like much fun."

The brunette nodded. Made to go inside and mumbled a meek 'thank you' as he hurried around the man. Anxiety bore into his bones, buzzed under his skin like an irritated swarm of bees. He fumbled with the hem of his sweater for comfort.

Inside was warm. Definitely much cozier than it seemed with its dark exterior. And not the kind of warm that had you shrugging your sweater off as the door closed behind you, but the comfortable kind of warm that would be good with a light sweater like his. Clanging metal, the banging of pots and pans, and the sizzling of a grill bled into this main area from a saloon door on the other side of the room. It should have been unpleasant - the smell of pastrami sandwiches, of hamburgers and fries, the lingering scent of beer, of old books and worn couches. But it wasn't. It was all serene. It just... It just *fit*. Made sense for the place. Simultaneously busy and peaceful.

The stranger offered another smile as he passed, knitted cardigan flowing behind him. When he didn't look back, the teenager realized he should probably follow. He stumbled a few steps, but found his pace quickly. The man rounded the bar, not sparing a second glance. The boy lingered in the middle of the room, not quite sure of his place. The older man quickly returned to whatever he had been doing before - inventory from the look of it. After a moment of curling and uncurling his fists, knuckles popping uncomfortably, the boy opted to sit himself atop a vinyl barstool. The angle was odd, just slightly off to the side of the man but still *almost* in front of him. The boy's elbow lined up with the middle of the man's sternum. Close enough, but he still had to turn his head to watch the other.

The material of the seat was uncomfortable under the teenager's fingers, so he chose to clasp his hands in his lap. Bottles clinked together as the kind stranger reorganized. "So," the man began, fiddling with a bottle. "What's your name?"

The boy straightened up at the sudden attention, a feeble attempt at presenting himself more professionally. "Wilbur Soot," he answered with an earnest nod.

The stranger mirrored him, head bobbing. "Pleasure to meet you." He set the bottle down in its rack, rotating it so that the label faced him. "So you were asking about the job. Are you

looking to apply? Because we are definitely looking to hire." Offered a breathy laugh and a reassuring smile before he glanced back down.

Oh, right. "Yes, sir, I am. I don't have a resumé, though, or any experience, so if that's a problem I would appreciate if you let me know *right now*-"

"Oh, please." The man waved him off with his right hand, fussing over a loose bottle spout with his left. "Just call me Phil." He adjusted the spout to his liking before fully directing his attention to Wilbur. "And no need to worry about the resumé; I won't need it. I'll help you put one together, though. In case you end up needing it down the line."

Wilbur blinked at him. "What- You will?"

"Sure! I mean-" A shrug. "Why not? Resumés are hard to put together, especially if you have no idea what you're doing. They take a long time and templates online are usually missing a lot of information you should be including - not to mention, you might not have anyone to proof it. And you're, what- fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Wilbur corrected harshly before he could think better of it. It was jarring, a swing right out of the gate. Left him suspended, waiting for a blow that would never land, for Phil to take it all back as quickly as he offered it.

Instead, the man laughed, breathy and light and disarmingly tolerable. "My bad, *sixteen*." He paused to clear his throat, but the smile didn't leave his face. "But the point still stands: I don't have a problem helping you out."

Wilbur's anxiety flooded out of his body with a sigh.

He slouched. Gave a thoughtful hum as a placeholder for his reply. Phil had been nice so far, had done nothing to give Wilbur cause for concern. But part of Wilbur - that paranoid nagging in the back of his brain - couldn't help but think that this seemed an awful lot like a trap. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, right? On the other hand, he could use the help with his resumé at the very least. God knew he wouldn't get it at home. He pressed his knuckles to his lips and mulled over his options, Phil waiting with saintly patience all the while. A beat later, Wilbur gave a single nod. "Alright. That, uh... That would be really great. For you to help me out like that."

Phil perked up. Flashed his teeth again, clearly pleased. "So it's settled then!" He picked up another bottle by its neck with a satisfied, tilting it almost completely horizontal. Wilbur watched warily from his seat as the liquid inside lapped at the bottom of the spout. "Do you want me to get you an application?"

"Yes, please," Wilbur agreed, timid but trying his best to be polite. He might have felt completely out of his depth, but that didn't mean Phil had to know.

"Good lad!" Phil replied enthusiastically. "I'm gonna go grab you one of those from the office right now." Without waiting for a response, Phil set down his things and made his way out the back door. Albeit confused, Wilbur watched him go.

He let out a huff. Cracked his wrists as he decided it would probably be best to sit quietly. He kicked his legs and waited, the toes of his sneakers occasionally thumping against the side of the bar. Phil didn't take long to return, wrenching open the back door and swiftly making his way inside. Wilbur sat up a little straighter as the man approached. Making his way behind the counter again, Phil slid a paperclipped packet across the bar top. "Thank you," Wilbur mumbled. His gaze flicked to Phil uncertainly when he placed a pen beside the packet. "And the whole thing with my lack of experience-?"

Phil shook his head. Smiled a tiny curve of his lips. "That's what training's for, mate; I'll *teach* you." He went back to checking the bottles in the rack, twisting spouts and smoothing over labels. "'Sides, everyone has to start somewhere."

Wilbur leaned back a little. Not enough to put himself off balance, but enough to create some space between him and this alarmingly kind stranger. He hummed, squinting. "You really need workers this bad?"

Phil cocked his head at the sudden change in atmosphere. "I suppose so; we only have like 2 servers on a good day and we get pretty busy in the evenings."

Wilbur crossed his arms over his chest. *So they need workers, but they somehow have the time to train someone with no experience? Yeah right.* He gave the stranger a real once over for the first time. Looking into every expression, every eye movement, every bit of body language. And nothing. What the fuck.

He huffed a humorless laugh, hot air puffing out of his nose. "Okay, what's really going on here?"

Phil stilled, brows knitting together. "Pardon?"

Wilbur was well aware that he looked like a mess. Nothing fit him quite right and he was a touch too bony and so, so anxious. He *knew*. That didn't give anyone license to pity him or manipulate him for their own gain. Sure, Phil had been nice to him so far, but Wilbur couldn't bring himself to fully trust the man's intentions. "What would be my rate?" he asked skeptically. A test of sorts.

"Fifteen an hour. California minimum wage."

The teenager gave another hum, unmoving.

"Is everything alright, mate?"

"Everything..." Wilbur took a deep breath. Schooled his features into what Phil truly believed a snake's smile to look like (if snakes *could* smile), venomous and sharp and inciting a spike of fear in those who saw it. "Everything is fine! Thank you so much for this opportunity. How about I take this application home to fill out and I'll bring it back in a few days?"

Just barely beginning to nod, Phil watched as the teenager snatched the packet, turned, and left, bell chiming violently as the door slammed behind him.

A week and some days later, Wilbur found himself outside of Wanderer's Hideaway again. The sun was out this time, sky a picturesque blue and void of clouds. He felt much more bleak than the scenery seemed to think appropriate.

He'd really fucked up this time, he was sure of it. Phil had been nothing but kind to him and he squandered it by being some moody teenager asshole. He worked *so hard* to get here. To even be allowed this opportunity, really. He had worked for months, spending hours at tutoring every week to get his grades up, making sure to follow through on his chores, keeping his mouth shut and trying to get along with the other kids, be it at school or at home. He couldn't afford to let it all be for nothing.

He tried his best to fix his appearance in the reflection of the window. Combed a hand through his hair, tried to smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt, huffed on his glasses and attempted to wipe them clean. When he looked back into his reflection, it didn't seem to change much. Swallowing his pride, he opened the door. Tugging on the handle, he opened it gently enough to keep the bell from ringing, but the wood still yawned at the pressure.

Phil made the smallest turn of his head in Wilbur's direction and the boy flushed, assuming he'd been caught. He ducked back out on instinct, one hand still holding the door ajar. From where Wilbur peered through the window, the older man didn't seem to notice him. Or at least, he pretended not to. *Come on*, Wilbur urged himself. With a quiet groan, he stepped inside again.

Phil stood behind the counter, a look of quiet concentration gracing his face. He seemed at peace, unbothered as he polished the water spots off of glasses, stacking and organizing to his satisfaction.

"Uhm, hi," Wilbur greeted awkwardly.

The blonde man gave him a soft smile, following the edge of a glass with his thumb. "Hey, mate," he returned, albeit wary. "Glad to see you in again."

Wilbur nodded. Let himself fully step in as the door swung shut behind him, heavy against its frame. Phil continued with his task, focus moving back to the cup in his hands rather than the flighty teenager across the room. If Wilbur was gonna go through with this, it would be because of his own decisions. Right.

The boy took his time crossing the room, leisurely observing. Realized he had never looked at the place so closely before - which wasn't saying much considering he'd only ever been inside one other time. The giant window he spent so much time staring into was actually its own room with worn couches and arm chairs, a few tables here and there, and a stage against the wall opposite the window. Beside the stage's few steps to floor-level was a glass door leading to what looked like a path, its destination a mystery. There were a few bookshelves in there, too, lined with an array of books and puzzles and board games. The bar portion of the room was long, narrow enough for people to walk two-wide behind the barstools. The actual bar ended about halfway through this room, the rest being taken up by four-top tables and a pool tables a few feet from the back door. Near the end of the bar farthest from the front was a door. He assumed it led to a patio, from what he could see of picnic tables, brick floor, hanging lights, and an old school firepit. *Pretty cool.*

He gave an impressed nod as he slid onto a bar stool. He didn't mean to frown when he looked at Phil, but it had reminded him of how rude he'd been. Guilt set thick in his veins. Wilbur ducked his head, allowing brunette bangs to hang over his eyes. "So, uhm..." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Turns out I need help filling out that application."

A grin spread over Phil's face, fond where it would've been mocking on anyone else. "Oh?" Phil asked, absently polishing off a set of water spots.

The tension in Wilbur's shoulders loosened. It *should* be concerning how safe Phil made him feel, *should* be a glaring, red flag, but that was a problem for Later Wilbur. Present Wilbur hesitated. Pinched the base of his ring finger and dropped his head. "I can't figure out what the forms are asking me to do..."

Phil laughed, strangely reassuring. Something about it told Wilbur that Phil certainly wasn't laughing *at* him. The sound washed over Wilbur like a wave of heat off a campfire, cozy and calm and safe. "I can help, don't worry." Phil set his things down, tucking the corner of his rag into his front pocket. "Still have those forms?"

Wilbur flushed. Coughed awkwardly into his fist as his gaze flicked to something over Phil's shoulder. He hummed, brows raised. "I, uhm." Phil cocked his head, amused. Dipped to meet Wilbur's gaze, leaning onto the counter with his palms. "I got upset and... threw them away?"

Another laugh, soft and work and god he needed to stop doing that; it was starting to make something in Wilbur's throat ache. Maybe he should ask about going to the doctor later. Probably not, though. "That's alright, mate, don't worry about it. I have plenty of extras." Phil moved towards the front door, stopping at the hostess stand and rummaging through a few things. Plucking out a manila folder, he replaced everything before returning. He sopped in front of the teenager, and once back in his usual spot, plopped the folder down.

A beat passed. Wilbur tapped his thumb against his leg.

"This job and everything. It's real?" He left room for Phil to answer, but the man only seemed more confused. Wilbur continued. "This isn't setup for some kind of practical joke or something?"

Phil frowned at that. "Of course not. Why - why would you think that?"

Wilbur shrugged. Gave Phil a sad smile, knowing exactly where this would lead the conversation. But he *had* to know. He couldn't afford any kind of compromise with this. "People have done more for less," he mumbled. "I guess I just don't understand why you're offering me so much help. You don't even *know* me."

Phil gave his own smile, but Wilbur couldn't read anything from it. Whatever emotion he was trying to express, it came across as a water mix of warmth and bittersweetness. "I might understand more than you'd think."

His heart sat heavy in his chest, the same way it did when he saw something he couldn't help but feel like he'd missed out on. Wilbur scrunched up his nose, desperate to move the

conversation along. "What - did you run a background check on me or something? Is that even legal without consent? I don't have a criminal record, just so you know."

Phil barked a laugh of surprise, and Wilbur couldn't help but return it. The room felt a little lighter. The older man shook his head, blonde hair tied into a bun swaying at the base of his neck. "You're young, Wilbur. Finding a job is hard enough. It should be a given that you have no experience, but a lot of employers don't understand that." A beat. "Plus, I *want* to."

Wilbur, unblinking and doubtful, held his gaze for a moment. Sighing as though he were relinquishing what was left of his pride, he pursed his lips. "Fine."

With a small smile, Phil took the small victory for what it was. "Alright." He moved around the bar and scooted a stool a little closer to Wilbur before sliding onto it. "Which part are you having trouble with?"

Wilbur wilted. "All of it."

Phil hummed, fighting a smile. "Well, you might want to start with writing down your name."

Feigning annoyance, Wilbur rolled his eyes. He laughed anyways. "Right, *okay*, old man. Are you gonna help me or not?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"So you're going to be playing utility a little bit," Phil began. "We're kind of understaffed at the moment so you're going to be hosting, serving, and running food."

Wilbur let out a sharp laugh, startling them both. "Sorry. That's just, uhm. That's a lot."

Or, Wilbur is anxious about his first day of work, and Phil tries to give him some semblance of stability.

Chapter Notes

CWs: bad parenting, passive aggression, belittling, anxiety, body image issues

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"Please, can we please go to the store so I can get a uniform for work? I've done all my homework and my chores - I'm using my own money. I only need two things-"

"Fine," his caretaker sighed. "We can do that. If you come grocery shopping with me in an hour, we can stop by the thrift store on the way home."

Wilbur gave a controlled smile, lips thin but with just enough effort that she would assume he was grateful. "Thank you."

"Mhm," the caretaker relied, absently fixing her collar. "Now go read a book or something. We'll leave around 4."

Nevermind that he'd read them all already. He gave a curt nod before rushing back up the stairs to his room. It didn't seem that he would need to wait that long; the clock in the hallway already read 3:37, assuming the hands didn't get stuck again. Crossing paths with a younger boy on his way down the hall, Wilbur slowed. "Is the clock still running alright?"

The boy checked his watch against the clock on the wall - a cheap band of leather with a cracked watch face. Wilbur remembered when the boy had saved up for the watch from the

swapmeet. It was likely stolen, but this kid had his heart set on it anyways. "Seems to be. Why?"

Wilbur shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. "Going with Miss Jane to run errands soon. Wanted to make sure I'm gonna be on time to leave if I follow that clock." He turned on his heel and continued down the hall, not waiting to receive the boy's confused 'oh.'

He pushed the door mostly shut behind him; three inches open had been the house rule and he didn't feel like challenging that today. Thankfully, Wilbur's roommate seemed to be out at the moment. Sitting in front of his bed cross-legged, he pulled a shoebox out from underneath and fished out a roll of socks marked with a black dot. Unfolding the wad, Wilbur gathered the few folded five- and one-dollar bills he saved. If he crossed his fingers, maybe this would be enough for what he needed. Trying not to linger on the thought too much, he shoved the bills into his pocket, replaced the shoebox under his bed, and lounged for a while.

There wasn't much to do, honestly, so he kept himself busy in the ways he could. Hands clasped to his stomach, he listened. Counted the footsteps of his foster siblings walking down the hallway. Took in the sound of the wind rustling the leaves outside his window. Hummed songs to himself. It didn't seem like much, but it passed the time.

Then, it was time for Wilbur to go downstairs. Sure, it was a few minutes early, but he wove around his housemates and stumbled down the stairs anyway. He always did; he didn't take very kindly to getting yelled at if they ended up leaving late because of him. His hair flopped up and down as he took the steps two at a time, careful not to let his sock-covered feet slip on the wood.

Jumping down the last few steps of the flight, Wilbur wasted no time in beelining for the door. Knelt and sloppily tied his shoes. In Miss Jane's absence he even tried to clean up his sneakers, licking the pad of his thumb and scrubbing at the shoe's graying rubber toe. The motion created a squeaking sound, but hardly any dirt came off.

He was so focused that he hardly noticed Miss Jane approaching. She sighed as she adjusted her bag on her shoulder. "Are you ready, Wilbur?" she asked, shifting her weight impatiently.

Wilbur shot up, stumbling for his footing as he moved out of her path. "Yes, sorry."

Miss Jane nodded, quiet as she grabbed her keys and walked out to the car. Wilbur fumbled to close and lock the door behind them, following. From there, the trip was irritatingly mundane. The car ride was quiet and grocery shopping was so, *so* boring. Wilbur made an effort to be as malleable as possible the entire time; it would be over quicker that way. He fidgeted awkwardly in line as they waited to check out and silently lugged armfuls of bags to the car when Miss Jane decided to ditch the shopping cart at the front doors.

When they got back into the car, Wilbur clipped his seatbelt into place and pushed himself as close to the car door as he could manage. Watched buildings and people as they blurred past, chin leaning into his palm, elbow carefully balanced on the armrest of the car door.

Miss Jane eyed him from her peripheral for a moment, thumb tapping against the steering wheel. "Do you still need to go to Goodwill?"

Wilbur turned to her, chin still in his hand, trying not to seem nonplussed. "Yes, please."

She gave a single nod and said nothing more. A few quick moments later, they pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall. "Okay," she sighed. "You can go in. You have half an hour tops. Do you understand?"

Wilbur nodded, hands now resting in his lap. "I won't be too long, I just need a shirt and pants."

Miss Jane nodded, hands still on the steering wheel. "Make sure you buy them one size bigger so that you can grow into them."

Wilbur frowned at that, but nodded anyway. He really didn't like that the clothes might be baggy for a while, but it wasn't worth the fight. He waited a moment, confused when neither of them moved. "Are you coming?"

Miss Jane looked at him, incredulous. "No. Why do I need to come with you? You're grown up enough, Wilbur - you're *sixteen*. You can go in and buy a uniform by yourself."

The teenager paled, any hope he'd felt for the trip draining from him. What had he done wrong? He nodded again. "You're right, I'm sorry," he breathed, mouth dry and heart hammering against his ribs. "I-I won't be long."

His only response was a curt nod and a hum of acknowledgement as she stared out the front window.

Wilbur cleared his throat as he opened the car door, careful not to ding the Honda parked next to them. Arriving with hurried steps, he pushed the store's door open gently, a digital bell chiming to signal the arrival of a new customer. No one paid him any mind and he heaved a sigh of relief. Wasting no time, he beelined for the men's section, pushing clothes along racks to find something decent. With a shaky hand - *why was he shaking?* - he snatched the first decent button-up he found in his size. Held it up, made sure it didn't have any funky stains of that it didn't smell bad. With a single nod to nobody but himself, he tucked it under his arm and did the same in his search for slacks. He *did* make the tiniest effort to check that they were close to the same shade of black, holding the pieces up against himself in a mirror. This would have to be good enough. By the time he reached the cash register, he was struggling to keep his breathing even. The cashier gave him a funny look as she finished ringing up the two items, but didn't press him about it. Just printed his receipt once he'd finished paying and handed over the clothes.

Then it was back to the car. Wilbur fumbled the handle a moment before yanking it open and sliding back into the passenger seat. Miss Jane startled beside him, but Wilbur ignored her. Just tried to keep his breathing as quiet as possible. "That was quick."

Wilbur nodded and hummed, still trying to control the pace of his breathing. "Yeah."

"You're sure those fit?" she asked, gesturing to the bag in his lap.

Wilbur gulped. Another nod. "Yes ma'am. They're a size bigger than what I *should* be wearing right now." It came off the slightest bit snarkier than he'd meant it, cringing internally, but it seemed to be appropriate for the situation.

"Alright," Miss Jane decided, clipped. "We're heading home then."

Wilbur shrunk in on himself, shoulders curling inwards. *Fine.*

Unfortunately, he hadn't been feeling any better about his first real day of work. School had flown by as he put all his focus into preparing himself emotionally rather than the anxiety that caused his hands to tremble. Wilbur showed up early for his four o'clock shift, looking over his appearance in the window. Black button up, black pants, and black sneakers, just like Phil said. Maybe it was a little dumb, but he hadn't expected his first real day of work to feel so... bit. So completely daunting, like he was standing in the shadow of a mountain. *Deep breath in, deep breath out, find your happy place*, he had vaguely remembered a foster parent a few homes ago instructing. It was a futile attempt to coach him out of a panic attack, but he clung to it in time like these. *That house had been a good house*, he remembered fondly. The people there had really tried to help him. He thought they would adopt him, too, with all the care and attention they gave him. Wilbur shaped up real quick after that house. With a final push of shaky courage, he nudged the door open.

Its chime was soft, but it scared Wilbur anyways. With a gasp and a muttered string of curses, a hand flew to his heart. Phil looked up from his usual place behind the bar where he was polishing a glass. "Y' all right there, mate?"

"Fine, thanks." It was defensive, embarrassment obvious, but Phil didn't acknowledge it. The door clicked shut as Wilbur fully stepped inside, barely flinching this time. "I just keep forgetting that's there."

Phil laughed and, again, Wilbur couldn't sense any ill intent. It felt affectionate, like a gentle hand reaching over to ruffle his hair. The smile it brought formed crow's feet near the older man's eyes, dimples emerging on his cheeks. The interaction was warm, in the way that a good blanket in autumn should be. Wilbur couldn't help but relax, anxious tension in his shoulders melting away.

Phil shook his head, fond smile still resting on his lips. "Happens to me too, don't worry about it."

"So." Wilbur took his time approaching the bar, arms swinging awkwardly. Phil made no hurry to finish his polishing, setting the glass down neatly once he was done. "Training."

The blonde nodded. "Right! We're training you today." He gave an encouraging smile as he rounded the counter, fumbling a little to tuck the rag into his pocket.

Good, looks like I'm not the only one who's nervous, Wilbur thought, relieved. He flushed, suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of being perceived. He was well aware of the way his button up hung off of him like a paper bag. Of the way it still smelled like grandpa sweater and Febreze. The way his too-big slacks only stayed up thanks to a belt (if he could

call it that; it was a glorified length of cracked, crumbling leather) his foster dad was lending him, the material clinging to his waist. He absently pulled at his shirt, trying to ignore the airflow between the worn material and his skin. He'd been in too much of a hurry yesterday to scout for clothes that actually fit him. Phil, not missing a beat, shook his head. *It's fine, mate. Nothing to worry about.* Wilbur somehow understood. Frowned, but tried his best to shake it off.

"So you're going to be playing utility a little bit," Phil began, adjusting his stance to something more relaxed. Wilbur found himself mirroring the older man. "We're kind of understaffed at the moment so you're going to be hosting, serving, and running food."

Wilbur let out a sharp laugh, startling them both. "Sorry! That's just, uhm. That's a lot."

Phil chuckled. "You're fine, mate. Don't worry. It sounds like more than it is; it's pretty cohesive when you get the hang of it. Like different steps of the same process, cutting out a few middlemen." The teenager gave a disbelieving hum, which Phil waved off. He leaned against the bartop. "Trust me; I was doing the same thing when I was your age."

"Hmm..."

Before Wilbur had the chance to speak, Phil pushed off the counter and spun to face the back door. "C'mon, Wil." He waved a hand, gesturing to follow him. "Let me give you a tour."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Nice new sweater, Wilbur."

Wilbur blinked. It felt like a threat. Why did it feel like a threat?

Chapter Notes

CWs: bad parenting, passive aggression, threats, implied threats, implied resource scarcity

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The first two weeks working at Wanderer's Hideaway flew by. They were nothing short of a rollercoaster, as learning curves usually were. Some days were easier than others. Other days... well, Wilbur was embarrassed to admit that he had walked out on more than a few training sessions. He'd been upset and had more than a few reasons - whether it be assuming Phil's pity or getting frustrated with difficult customers, and stormed out, throwing his apron on the ground at all. At least they hadn't been full walkouts; it was usually half an hour or so of Wilbur pacing down the block or sitting on a curb somewhere behind the bar to set himself straight. But one thing that never changed was that he would *always* come back. With his tail between his legs, he'd nudge the door open and Phil (being the saint he was) greeted him with a clean slate every single time. Wilbur didn't deserve it - he knew that much - but Phil's understanding made it all sting a little bit less. Even though he definitely wasn't the easiest worker Phil had come through Wanderer's Hideaway, he felt like the man at least respected his efforts.

Turns out his first two weeks weren't for nothing. Wilbur had kind of forgotten he was, you know, *earning a wage*. He came into work dressed in his black uniform, backpack still around his shoulders and not flinching at the chime of the bell as he pushed the door open. He was in his element now, settled after taking his time to adjust during each shift. "Afternoon, Phillip."

Phil smiled from his usual spot, looking up from the clipboard he held. *More inventory*. "Good afternoon, Wilbur. How's it going today?"

Wilbur gave a breathy laugh. "It is *definitely* going."

"Better than it going badly." Phil's smile widened.

Wilbur scrunched up his nose. "I guess so." Not missing a step, he started making his way towards the break room - a space a little bit bigger than a janitor's closet branching off from the kitchen.

"Oh, Wilbur!" Phil called abruptly, setting his things down on the bartop and walking after the teenager.

The brunette slowed, allowing some space for the older man to catch up. "Yeah, what's up?"

Phil smiled up at him, falling into stride beside him. "Today's payday! I wanted to make sure you get your check before I forget or get distracted or something." Wilbur cocked his head and Phil looked at him oddly. "Y' alright, mate?"

Wilbur nodded aggressively. "Yeah, I'm fine. I guess I just forgot that I was getting paid?"

The blonde gave a light laugh. "Of course you're getting paid! You've been giving me your time; you deserve something in return."

Another nod from Wilbur. Just one this time, to show his acknowledgement. "That's fair."

Phil nodded too, seeming pleased. He led the way to the break room even though Wilbur had been through there a handful of times already. The teenager trailed awkwardly behind, hurrying through doors when Phil held them open for him. He hummed gratefully each time, ducking his head in a sort of half-nod.

The room was small - the closet description was *not* an exaggeration - just long enough for three people to spread their arms out without their palms touching. It definitely felt a little crowded when there were four or five of them in there, knocking elbows and sitting on countertops. It was just a dressed-up nook with saloon-style doors. Against one of the wider walls, instead of lockers was a counter and some cabinets. The rest of the room was empty save for a full length mirror leaned against one wall and a folding chair behind the door. Leaning up on his tiptoes, Phil took down a clipboard from where it rested atop the cabinets. *This man and his clipboards.*

Clipped on was a stack of envelopes on top of a sign off sheet and a few other papers. Phil unclipped the envelopes and shuffled through them, stopping once he found one with Wilbur's name on it. "Alright, here's yours," he announced, holding out the check without looking up. Wilbur fumbled to take it from him. Phil unclipped a form from underneath the sign off sheet and handed the clipboard to Wilbur. "Just sign for your check and fill out the form when you're ready, then just put everything back up there. The form is just to make sure the amount on your check is correct."

Wilbur hummed. Followed the shape of the pen with his thumb. "Thank you."

Phil patted him on the shoulder as he moved past. "No worries, mate."

Wilbur turned, watching him go. "Wait, you're not gonna-?"

Phil stopped at the door, one hand against its frame. "Am I gonna what, Wilbur?" He didn't sound upset. It seemed more like he was prodding for a clue. Trying to meet Wilbur halfway. Wilbur almost frowned. This was all so weird and confusing. He couldn't even walk into a corner store without the cashier watching him like a hawk. No Phil was just going to leave him alone with all of these paychecks?

A moment later, Wilbur shook his head. If Phil was going to take a chance on trusting *him*, some random stranger with a shitty work uniform and an inaptitude for self care, then he would try his best not to fuck it up. Don't bite the hand that feeds you, right? "Nothing. Thank you! For-" He waved his paycheck vaguely. "For this."

Phil laughed, turning to leave again. "It's literally the law, mate. Don't worry about it."

Humming to himself, Wilbur leaned against the counter and began to fill out the paperwork.

"I'm giving you ten minutes to get ready, Wilbur!" Phil called teasingly from somewhere off in the kitchen.

Wilbur rolled his eyes, not fighting his fond smile. There was no one around to see it anyways. "Lright, boss. I'll be out in five!"

Two days later, the check had been processed and deposited. Wilbur's caretakers and his caseworker had (begrudgingly - well, at least on his foster parents' part) helped him set up a bank account once they realized Phil intended on keeping Wilbur working a while. At least he didn't have to worry about his shoebox method anymore or getting robbed blind in the middle of the night. He'd been agonizing over what to do with the money since he held that envelope in his hands for the first time. Sure, there was no shame in saving it, but he wanted to make his first real purchase with his own hard-earned money. Now he had his own bank account, not just a few bucks he'd saved here and there from chores or birthdays.

It had taken him an entire day to decide on anything, but he'd completely made up his mind by the time he arrived back home after school. Wilbur lingered near Miss Jane in the living room until she sighed and looked up from whatever daytime television garbage she'd been so absorbed in. "Yes, Wilbur?" she asked, annoyed.

Wilbur pushed his hands into his pockets, a vain attempt at ceasing their shaking. Yet he steeled himself. "Are you still planning on running errands today?"

"Yes."

At the coffee table, two of his foster siblings looked up from their homework. Watched on with scrutinizing gazes. Fidgeting awkwardly under their stares, he did his best to ignore them.

After taking a moment to mull it over, Miss Jane gave a curt nod. "I guess that's fine; it might go faster that way, and you've been keeping up with your chores. We'll leave at 4:30."

Wilbur forced a smile, just a slight curve of his lips. "Thank you." Not waiting for her response, of which there would likely be none, he turned and left the room.

As he headed toward the stairs, one of his foster siblings trailed after him. "Wilbur!" she called softly, only a few steps behind him. Wilbur turned. She was 11, if he remembered correctly, with sandy blonde hair tied up in pigtails. He hadn't put the effort into committing her name to memory; he hadn't thought he'd last this long here. "You're getting things from Target?"

Wilbur nodded simply. "Yeah, I am."

She smiled hopefully. "Do you think you could get me something, too?"

Oh. Wilbur frowned, crouching down a little to be eye-level with her. "I-I don't think I can, actually. I'm sorry."

The smile fell from her face. "Oh." Bottom lip wobbling, her gaze dropped to the carpeted floor. "Have fun at the store, Wilbur."

Wilbur watched as she ran off to one of the rooms down the hall. He tried not to feel too guilty as he climbed the stairs. He had to look out for himself - one one else would do it for him. And he might've stayed here for longer than he'd originally anticipated, but he *knew* this family wasn't going to adopt him. He would probably never get adopted, if he was being honest. Another two years and he'd be out on his own with none of the resources of the foster system to help him. He was sure he would be able to find some if he asked the right person, but figuring out who to ask would be opening a whole new can of worms. Regardless, he had to be ready.

Instead of lingering on that train of thought for too long, Wilbur made his way to his shared room and let his mind wander. The decision hadn't been much, more a process of elimination than anything. Good was only allowed in the kitchen and there were no personal snacks, meaning that whatever he got would be up for grabs and would probably be gone before he even got the chance to try it. He could get himself a toy, but he's sixteen and honestly wouldn't know what to get anyways. Besides, it would probably either get stolen or broken by one of the other kids, so it wasn't really worth the trouble. Electronics were out of the question; Wilbur wouldn't have the money to pay for services and, again, it might get broken or stolen. That, and he didn't want to give his foster parents a reason to manipulate him into chipping in on the electricity bill. He wouldn't be able to get anything useful for living on his own without his foster parents getting suspicious of him planning to run away again. The only option left was clothing. He needed a new sweater anyways - something with less holes and loose threads that would last him the winter. With his current sweater, he had to wear an extra shirt just to brave the wind. Kind of annoying. So a sweater it was.

"Wilbur!" Miss Jane called up the stairs. Wilbur startled, bolted up straight. "Are you ready?"

It had been an hour already? Wilbur stumbled around his room a moment, looking for anything he may need to bring. *A wallet would be nice. You know, with my money inside.* "Uhhhh." Kneeling down beside his bed, he pulled out his shoebox full of socks again and dug around until he found it. The leather was warped and loose, sun-bleached from all its

years. His foster dad had 'donated' it to his cause since he finally had something to put in it. Probably just an excuse to get himself a new one. "Coming!"

Wilbur hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time and dodging younger foster kids on the way. He jumped down the last few steps from the edge of the last landing, narrowly missing the bottom step. Miss Jane stood with her arms crossed, purse hanging from the crease of her elbow. "Please don't fall; I will *not* be the one to take you to urgent care."

Wilbur gave a breathy laugh, barely there. "I won't, don't worry." She didn't need the assurance. He offered it anyways. He strode past her, shoving his feet into his sneakers, not bothering with the laces.

Standing up straight, Wilbur tried his best to ignore her scowl. "Ready now?" she asked coldly.

He nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"Okay, let's go, please. You're already made us late," she mumbled, already unlocking the door and making her way outside.

Wilbur bristled. "Yeah, sorry about that. Guess I took too long putting on my *untied sneakers*," he snapped, hands in his pockets as he followed her out to the car.

Miss Jane whirled around, pointed her keys at him. "Watch your tone, Wilbur. I can just leave you here, you know."

A stroke of fear flooded through him, a flash of white-hot under his skin, and he froze. Embarrassment moved slowly through him, thick in his veins. Heat raced up his neck. *God*, did it make him feel like an idiot for acting out. "Yes ma'am. Sorry."

She gave a single nod, alarmingly satisfied with his compliance. They piled into the car, silent save for the shitty music playing from the radio, and went on their way. Trees and buildings blurred past, all white and gray and brown, like someone smeared an oil painting. The drive felt shorter, though just as boring. They pulled into a parking spot, Miss Jane wasting no time in turning off the car's engine. Before getting out, she pulled her grocery list from her bag and tore off a little less than half, handing it to Wilbur. "We'll split up; it'll be faster that way. You can get your half and whatever it was you wanted to buy for yourself. I'll be waiting by the pharmacy once I'm finished."

"Oh," Wilbur mumbled, still processing. "Okay."

She hummed, pursing her lips before pushing her door open and sliding out. Wilbur did the same, anxiously fumbling with his things. The two of them didn't exchange a single word as they approached the store. Miss Jane left him with a stern, "Remember, the pharmacy. Don't take too long." She then turned her cart down an aisle and didn't look back, blonde ponytail swishing as she went.

Wilbur frowned. Grabbed himself a basket and headed off in the opposite direction. It didn't take him very long to find everything on the list; it was mostly school supplies for the

younger kids and a few household essentials. His basket practically overflowed as he approached the clothing section. Not minding it much, he rested it on his sneaker-clad toes as he looked around. September was just late enough in the summer season that the store was beginning to release its fall collection. Luckily that meant having a decent selection of sweaters to choose from. Wilbur took his time assessing his options. He tried not to be picky, but they were all too thick, or too scratchy. Too tight in the collar, or with necklines that bordered on being claustrophobic. Too snug in the wrong places, or too short for his arms.

Finally, he found the perfect sweater. Knitted and plush. Not too scratchy, just baggy enough to be comfortable without making him look sloppy. Thick enough to keep him warm without getting unbearably hot, durable, and golden yellow. Yellow enough to flow in the oranges, pinks, and golds of the sunset leaking through the store's front windows. Exactly what he'd been looking for. Well, maybe not the color; definitely not something he would've looked for himself if it hadn't been at the front of the display. But it was comfortable *and* affordable, both enough to satisfy Wilbur.

Folding the sweater over his arm, he picked up his basket and headed towards the pharmacy. Weaving through aisles and dodging stray shopping carts, it only took a minute or two for the giant red *PHARMACY* sign to come into view. Then, standing beside the gummy vitamins with arms crossed and foot tapping, stood Miss Jane. She checked her watch as Wilbur approached, scowling. "You took-"

Not as long as you're making it out to be.

"-Way too long, Wilbur. We need to leave. I still have to make dinner," she scolded, beginning to push her cart just as Wilbur reached the center walkway.

"Sorry, there was a lot to choose from," he tried.

Miss Jane just shook her head. "Last time I bring you shopping with me," she muttered under her breath. Wilbur just barely caught it, stomach churning. Everything from that point to their drive home was a little fuzzy, blurred by Wilbur's anxiety.

Suddenly, the car was parked in the driveway, its engine coming to a stop. Wilbur blinked once, then twice, taking in his surroundings all at once. He sat with his chin in his palm still, facing out the passenger window. Miss Jane had gathered her things and opened her own door by the time he finally moved, muscles sore from his stiffness. "Come on, Wilbur," she called distantly, and Wilbur decided it was time to get up.

Dinner that night was strangely awkward - well, more so than normal. The discomfort of family dinner didn't ease any when everyone and their mother knew this wouldn't be the house to adopt you. But Wilbur assumed it was a Him Problem, not a household problem. Swirled his spaghetti and chewed through the tension one forkful at a time. He wasn't trying to stick around too long regardless of the weird vibes everyone was giving off.

A fork scraped along a plate loudly and he cringed, looking up. One of the boys across the table glowered. Jerked his chin in Wilbur's direction. He was a few years younger than Wilbur and dressed completely in faded black. "Nice new sweater, Wilbur." Something in the

air became a little more dense, new sweater suddenly hanging with crushing weight from his shoulders.

Wilbur blinked. It felt like a threat. Why did it feel like a threat? He nodded a polite smile. A nonverbal, obligatory *thank you*. Hesitated a moment before returning to his spaghetti, and shoveled it into his mouth.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Phil was looking at him oddly. His brows were furrowed, something in his stare watery and fragile. It put something heavy on the back of Wilbur's tongue, made his throat all tight. What was he missing?

"The home, ' like a group home?"

Oh. He really hadn't meant to say that.

Chapter Notes

CWs: none

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"Hi, Phil," Wilbur greeted easily, door chiming as it shut behind him.

"Hello, Wilbur," Phil returned, smiling up from his usual inventory sheet. Wilbur had come to learn that it was actually part of a checklist of opening duties that Phil had to complete everyday. The establishment was slow enough in the afternoons that Phil didn't *have* to complete the checklist before actually flipping the 'OPEN' sign and turning the front lights on; he had enough slack to take his time with it throughout the day and be finished by the time things started picking up. He made a mark with his pen, clipboard against his hip.

"How's your day going?"

"It's going fine, old man. You?"

"I'm fine, thank you," the blonde answered easily, half-paying attention as he squinted at something on the paper.

Wilbur nodded goofily, hummed, and went straight on to the break room. It had become part of his routine: walk in, say hello to Phil, make fun of him for being old, get ready for work, clock in. He had almost worried that he would never settle in, but weeks later Wilbur had his own system put together and knew the place better than the back of his hand. Knew the speakeasies inside and out, had stocking patterns memorized, and bussed tables like no other. He fit right in, Phil made a point to assure him of it. Wilbur considered himself a part of the

place now, just like when Phil joked about practically living there with how often Wilbur was around. Wilbur tried not to be embarrassed; he found himself here trying to escape the chaos of his home life to get homework done and showed up earlier than necessary to prepare for his shift. He had been working there for a couple months at this point and didn't plan on leaving anytime soon. Having to interact with people was annoying and the prospect of accidentally dropping someone's dinner on the way to their table brought Wilbur to grind his teeth, but it felt like easy money to him. (And Phil was pretty cool, too, but Wilbur wouldn't admit that to his face.)

"Door!" Wilbur yelled just a second before pushing through the kitchen's saloon doors.

"Hi Wilbur!" came a cheerful greeting. A man stood at the cooktop, dark hood pulled over his head, tending to a hamburger patty.

"Hello, Bad," Wilbur returned warmly, rounding a prep table. He peeked over the man's shoulder as he moved past. "Mobile order?"

Bad shook his head. "Lunch!"

"Nice," Wilbur chuckled. "I'm gonna go get ready for my shift. You enjoy that hamburger for me, alright?"

Bad tipped his head in the boy's direction. "Sure will, 'Bur. Have a good shift!"

Wilbur nodded to himself and kept moving. When he arrived at the employee room, he shoved his backpack into an empty cabinet and turned to the mirror. Worked to straighten out any wrinkles, flatten out his collar, roll up his sleeves, tie his apron on properly. When he was satisfied with the appearance of his uniform, he deemed it finally time to clock in. More weaving around corners and calling out 'behind's as he returned to the front. His co-workers began to roll in as dinner-time inched closer. Wilbur bussed tables and checked in with the kitchen and Phil as he waited, flashing a polite smile each time someone greeted him.

"M expecting it to be busy tonight," Phil called abruptly.

When Wilbur looked up, he found the man half-turned from where he had been prepping garnishes at backbar. "Oh?"

Phil nodded. "Yeah. There's a big boxing match tonight. Pay per view."

Wilbur hummed, still a moment. Scrubbed idly at a sticky spot on a tabletop. "Pay per view?"

Another nod from Phil. "That's right."

Wilbur squinted at him. "That means you have to *pay* to watch." And another nod. "Phil."

The blonde gave a cheeky grin, shoulders hiking up to his ears. "It's a tax write-off if I do it this way!"

"Is that even *legal*?"

Phil shrugged. "Fuck if I know," he chuckled, cutting a lemon half into four wedges. Wilbur found his eyes lingering on the fruit sprawled across Phil's workstation instead of trying to meet the man's gaze. "Besides, since when do you care if anything's legal?"

"Since you started paying me," Wilbur jested.

Phil scoffed in response. "Fair enough." Then, the conversation died off. It wasn't uncomfortable or anything, like that weird, heavy silence after someone says something that doesn't fit in with the rest of the interaction. No, it was comfortable. Light. No room for uncertainty. The two of them were simply getting their work done, getting their prep in to make sure they had a smooth evening service.

And Phil was right; in all the time that Wilbur had worked there (granted, it hadn't been all that long in the grand scheme of things), he hadn't seen a night as busy as this. When Phil pulled him aside at 8:00 to break him, Wilbur actually gave a sigh of relief. "Break time?" Wilbur checked.

Phil couldn't help but laugh a little bit as he clapped the boy on the shoulder. "Yeah, mate. Break time."

Wilbur laughed, mouth widening into a lazy grin. "Oh, hell yeah."

Phil laughed again. Looked over his shoulder to make sure there were no new orders awaiting him. "Yeah. Why don't you go put in an order for yourself?"

Wilbur ran a hand through his hair, rolling his shoulders. "Can't argue with that, boss."

Phil shook his head. "You feel like putting in a slice of pizza for me while you're at it?"

"Sure." And with that, Wilbur was off. He put in his order and waited patiently at the expo window. When the cook slid his hot pastrami sandwich across the counter followed by a slice of pepperoni pizza, Wilbur couldn't help but jump up and down a few times. "Thank you, Skeppy!"

"No problem, Wilbur," the man replied, waving through the window with a spatula.

"A slice of za for Mr. Phil!" Wilbur called as he made his way back to the bar.

Phil grinned, pouring a cocktail. Bad worked behind him, flashing a smile at the teenager as he organized bottles and poured beer from the draft. Phil went back to finishing the cocktail, enthusiastically serving his guest before patting Bad on the shoulder. He seemed to say something pretty close to the man's ear. Wilbur couldn't make it out over the music. Bad smiled again, and Phil moved to meet the boy at the end of the bar.

"Special delivery for, uhm..." Wilbur checked the palm of his hand. "For one Phillip Craft?"

"Hmm. Thank you, Wilbur." The blonde took the plate from him, set it on the back of the bar. "My saving grace."

Wilbur waved him off. "Oh, how you flatter me, Phil."

"Yeah, yeah." The older man rolled his eyes, already reaching towards a bottle of bitters that Bad seemed to be gesturing toward. "Now go eat that sandwich before it gets fuckin' cold, ya hear?"

"Yes, sir!" Wilbur saulted. It was all in good fun, his and Phil's banter. He picked up his plate and retreated to the bar's secret back patio, warm smile curving his lips. This was his secret spot; a dark corner hidden around the side of the coffee bar. It was nice. Isolated. Here he didn't have to worry about running into any annoying customers who would look at him like they'd never heard of a government mandated break before. Plus, the coffee bar was weird. It was kind of fun to look at. A repurposed, Barney-purple shipping container with this weird door opening mechanism? It really just lifted one of the side walls so that you could access the counter. Strangely, it worked for the place. And on weekends, from 8 to close, the coffee bar turned into a tropical bar, alcoholic beverages with ID and a few nonalcoholic drinks as well. So yeah, Wilbur deemed it pretty cool. It was *his* spot, and he'd fight anyone who dared disturb his peace tooth and nail for it.

He sat on his secret bench in his secret corner, legs stretched out as he happily munched on his pastrami sandwich. Extra crispy, just how he liked it. Mustard smudged at the corner of his mouth, but he didn't much mind it. Wilbur was more concerned with what constellations he could find in tonight's sky before he could finish his dinner. It didn't take him but fifteen minutes to finish his sandwich and find himself bored, kicking his heels against the pavement. Something about the commotion inside tonight was drawing him in.

He decided on a whim. Stood abruptly, half-apron swaying at the motion, ditched his used plate at the kitchen's wash counter, and weaved his way to the end of the bar counter. He was almost taken aback as he spotted Phil, smiling confidently as he made drinks for patrons, Bad working at his back. Wilbur leaned against the wall, curious and electing to watch.

Bed and Phil worked together seamlessly, like they'd been doing this dance for years. For all Wilbur knew, they probably had been. How had Wilbur never seen them like this before? Phil called for a bottle and Bad retrieved it, handing it off by the neck seemingly without a second thought. Phil stirred, shook, rimmed, garnished, strained, and all the while Bad moved around him with only a pat on the shoulder to signal his movements. A printer on the back of the bar began to whirl, muffled by the chatter. Its green light blinked and it spit out a small rectangle of paper, only three lines of ink running across it. Bad snatched it off the printer without looking. Dipped the top of the paper in the dip sink and stuck it on the counter so that it was hanging off of the bartop's edge. Gave Phil a pat and a gesture towards the ticket before going back to checking the fill of each of their most popular bottles.

Phil nodded and smiled. Hollered his thanks over his shoulder. It went unacknowledged, but Phil didn't seem too upset by it, so Wilbur assumed that it was normal for him. Bad was probably too busy with his work to return the sentiment. All it took was a blink for Phil to be done making the drink on the ticket, finishing the look with an orchid garnish. Phil began walking hastily towards Wilbur, and Wilbur almost startled until he realized the man was only putting the drink up to get taken to its table. "Oh, hey Wilbur!"

"Hi," Wilbur greeted, half-distracted. The drink was pretty - pale yellow fading into lavender in a tall, skinny glass.

Noticing the smudge of yellow at the corner of Wilbur's mouth, Phil chuckled and pressed a napkin into his hand. Wilbur cocked his head. "You've got some mustard," Phil explained, tapping the corner of his own mouth.

Wilbur's eyebrows raised, a moment of realization as he wiped the smudge away. "Thanks."

The other man hummed. "How much longer of your break?"

Wilbur checked his watch, a simple little thing with a silver face and a black, pleather band. Bargain deal at Marshalls. "Uh, seven minutes."

Phil nodded. "Alright. Want something to drink?" Wilbur's eyes widened, and Phil chuckled. "Like a *soda*, or something else not against the law," he amended.

Wilbur blushed, then nodded. "A pepsi, please?"

Nodding, Phil wordlessly pulled a plastic cup from the removable shelf. Filled it halfway with the crunch, little ice balls that Wilbur offhandedly mentioned liking once, and filled the other half with pepsi.

Wilbur smiled sheepishly. Grabbed the drink and raise it towards Phil. "Thanks."

"No problem, mate." Phil relaxed against the bar, one hand resting on his opposite wrist.

Wilbur took a sip. Let the drink sit in his mouth a moment as he gestured toward whatever it was the older man had made just a moment before. "What's that?"

Phil turned to look at the drink again, allowing himself to smile at Wilbur's curiosity. "A California haze. Pretty, huh?"

Wilbur hummed in agreement, raising his own drink to his lips again. "Mhm. What's in it?"

Phil tipped his head back and closed his eyes, thinking. His hands remembered better than his brain did, it seemed. "Passion fruit lemonade, butterfly pea tea, and vodka," he recited after a moment.

"Sound pretty easy."

Phil shrugged. "Guess so. It's all about the ratio."

"What ratio?" Wilbur laughed into his cup. "It's only like three ingredients."

Another shrug. Phil smiled almost as though responding to a challenge. "It's a lot more to think about than three ingredients. You have to worry about the shape and size of the glass, temperature, dilution, what kind of ice you need to use, what garnish will work best - a whole host of things."

Oh. Wilbur pressed his lips to the rim of his cup, but he didn't drink.

Phil's smile relaxed and he leaned towards Wilbur a little, nudging him with his elbow. "Anyone can throw together three ingredients to make a cocktail. What makes a good drink is knowing how to use those ingredients." He pointed to Bad, who looked to be taking over for Phil for a moment. The man smiled softly, listening to a patron talk about their day as he shook a drink over his shoulder. Wilbur leaned closer, making sure he'd be able to hear Phil over the noise.

"See how Bad's shaking that drink?"

Wilbur did.

"You can't do that with the drink I just made." Wilbur's gaze flicked back to the glass with its mesmerizing yellow-purple ombre. The colors bled together perfectly, no harsh lines or odd spots of pigment. "If you put that drink in a shaker it'll all turn brown and it won't be as pretty."

Wilbur frowned at the thought. "Yeah."

Phil laughed, clapped the boy on the shoulder. They stood in silence a moment, simply observing. Wilbur usually liked to watch the patrons, liked to watch all the life happening around him here, but he couldn't pull his gaze away from the drinks Bad was mixing. Orange and pink and amber, color after color coming out, each in a different kind of cup with a different garnish. Orange twists, lime wheels, cucumber ribbons, each delicate in its own right. "What's he making now?" Wilbur blurted, gesturing towards Bad with his cup again.

Phil squinted in Bad's direction a moment. "Oh! A paloma - tequila, lime juice, grapefruit juice, and soda water. We usually do a salt rim with a grapefruit wedge for garnish on that one."

"And what about the ice?"

Phil turned to Wilbur, observed him for a moment. Cocked his head and smiled. "Bigger ice cubes."

"Why?"

"The littler cubes melt faster and water down the drink. Bigger ice cubes take longer to melt, so the drink will taste the way it's supposed to for longer," he answered without missing a beat. Wilbur nodded, still watching. "Is any of this interesting to you, Wil?" Phil waved towards the general bar area.

Wilbur turned to him, nodding. "Yeah! It's all really new to me. I don't know anything about alcohol, but it all seems pretty interesting - in, like, a not troublemaking teenager kind of way. It's just interesting to hear about. Like chemistry, kind of."

Phil nodded in approval. "'Ve you ever thought about barbacking someday?"

Wilbur's eyes widened, brows shooting up.

"Not anytime soon, obviously; you can't even legally *walk* behind the bar until you're 21." There was that laugh again, and the lack of bite that came with it.

Wilbur used another sip of his soda to buy himself some time to recompose. He took a sip, nodded in understanding, let his gaze flick across the patrons lining the bar. He swallowed, tongue darting anxiously across his lower lip. "So barbacking is like...?"

"What Bad does," Phil finished.

Another nod from Wilbur. Another sip. Another hum. "I mean, sure," he answered finally, trying to seem nonchalant. "Bad's job seems pretty interesting, but I think I would be a little more into the bartending side of things."

Phil nodded, pouring his own water. "Yeah," he agreed simply. "Most bartenders do start as a barback, though."

Another hum, another sip. Wilbur shifted anxiously against the wall, not quite sure what exactly Phil was trying to get out of him.

Phil's attention shifted to the steadily growing crowd in front of Bad. His colleague had yet to ask for help, so he decided not to move just yet. "I could train you. If you wanted, you know," he offered casually. "It would probably just be a little different from actual training since you can't touch alcohol yet."

Wilbur lit up at that, setting his cup down on the counter. "Really? That would be so *cool*!" If he could let himself have one thing, it would be this. He could have this. "I-I-" he stumbled a moment, giving himself a second to haphazardly collect his thoughts. "I- yeah!" That would be awesome, I am so game for that. I just have to be back at the home by 10 so I don't get locked out." He sighed, then to himself, "Jeez. *Barbacking*!"

When he finally turned his gaze back to Phil, the man was looking at him oddly. His brows were furrowed, something in his stare watery and fragile. It put something heavy on the back of Wilbur's tongue, made his throat all tight. What was he missing?

"'The home' like a group home?" Phil's voice was strained and heavy, alarmingly clear through all the chatter and the music.

Oh. He really hadn't meant to say that. The room seemed to slow around Wilbur, all movement blurring around the edges of his vision. It was like he could feel all the blood rush out of him, heart dropping. He tried to swallow, Adam's apple bobbing, throat dry. His teeth clicked as his mouth shut. Suddenly, he felt much too small to be in such a crowded room, much too young to be packed in with all of these adults. He felt like a *boy*, especially after Phil had put so much effort into treating him like he was grown. Felt like he didn't belong *here* of all places, under the stench of spilled beer and freshly opened tequila, hot truffle fries and pastrami sandwiches. Wilbur allowed a single blink and a nod, keeping his eyes low. "Yes," he answered, tongue like a dead thing in his mouth.

And Phil, not missing a beat, nodded and hummed. Pressed his lips into a reassuring smile before taking a sip of water. Wilbur fought a cringe.

"Not a problem, mate," Phil assured. "Let me know when you're available and we'll get it worked out. No worries."

Wilbur nodded absently. Tried not to be too impolite when he checked the time. "Ah," he sighed, feigning disappointment. "Gotta clock back in, Phil. Catch you later." Wilbur turned and, from the corner of his eye, it almost seemed like the man was reaching for him. Wilbur brushed it off as a trick of the light. Wove through his coworkers crowding the servers' nook and clocked back into his shift.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"Wilbur," Bad called. "He's not upset with you. Or about you."

"...Okay."

Bad smiled without turning around. "I don't think he could be if he wanted to."

Chapter Notes

CW: anxiety, themes of (vague) self isolation

if you wanna hear me talk about the fic and the larger AHFW universe, feel free to find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A week or so later, Wilbur came into work and everything *should* have been fine. It should have felt fine for days - just an average Tuesday afternoon. But Wilbur found himself staring at the front door, thumbs hooked around his backpack straps, focusing on the pacing of his breath. His lips pursed as he brought his focus to the glass door's centered logo, studied it as he rocked back and forth on his toes. It was a whimsical design, a shield-like outline with the letters *WH* floating in the center, gold with periwinkle details. Despite it representing a great point of anxiety, the design brought some semblance of calm with its intricacy.

His nose scrunched in thought, fingers dancing across his collarbone. After a week of steadily building anxiety, today felt like some kind of boiling point. The thought made his stomach twist.

One deep breath and he was jumping in headfirst, wrenching the door open with one hand. The bell chimed violently, knocking against the window as Wilbur stepped inside. Phil, at his usual post, jumped at the noise. "Hi, Wilbur," the man greeted, cautious.

Wilbur wasn't trying to stick around for anymore of this eggshell dance they'd been doing. "Hello, Phil," he replied flatly, continuing on towards the kitchen. A beat passed and the silence that stretched between them almost made Wilbur feel guilty. It was uncomfortable, a momentary stinging in the left side of his chest when Phil's reply didn't come, when the air between them hung heavy. He shook it off with a purposeful huff, the air hot in his throat. His

shoes sounded heavier than normal against the concrete floors. He tried not to pay the noise too much mind.

Behind him, Phil turned on the bar maiden for a moment - the little machine in the sink with the brushes that spin. Wilbur liked to mess with it sometimes before the evening rush came in. Phil washed another pint glass - a new one if the empty boxes by the patio door were any indication. Then the machine turned off and the silence between them settled once more, thickening with the near-complete lack of sound. "Is everything okay, Wil?" Phil asked, sounding distant.

Something about it pulled a wire loose in Wilbur's brain. Made his pace stutter and halt. He turned to Phil, expression dropping to be replaced by something colder. "Yeah. Fine, thanks."

Wilbur's sight landed on Phil and found the man staring dumbly at him, eyes squinted with a sort of hesitant concern. When he registered Wilbur's gaze, he jumped, fumbling the pint glass in his hands. It clattered against the bottom of the sink, Phil reaching through the bristles to retrieve it.

With an uncomfortable hum, Wilbur disappeared through the kitchen's swinging doors, not looking back. He stuttered again when he was met with Bad's back, the man cleaning countertops across the kitchen. "Hey, Wilbur!" Bad smiled at the sight of a head of messy brown hair, pushing his glasses up and waving with the wet rag in his hand. It was an odd image, seeing the man without his signature hooded sweater. Instead he wore a white tee shirt, his usual garment hanging from a hook by the lockers.

"Hello, Bad," Wilbur greeted with a touch too much of a sigh and instantly regretted it. He ducked his head, too guilty to see if he had actually upset Bad, and gave a quite hum as he finished his journey to the staff room. His movements were clumsy once he began getting situated. He swung the cabinet door open too far, knocking it against the others. Pushed his backpack barely over the edge of the highest shelf. Haphazardly shoved his sleeves up to his elbows instead of carefully rolling them like he usually did. He was leaning against the counter with his palms when the light streaming in from the kitchen dulled. Looked up to find Bad resting against the doorframe.

"You doin' okay, 'bur?" he asked, the curve of his lips a strange mix between a smile and a frown.

Wilbur nodded, gave a sorry smile that was more a scrunch of his nose than his mouth curling. "Yeah. Just in a bad mood today, sorry."

Bad hummed, thinking a moment, arms crossed over his chest. "Are you hungry at all?"

Wilbur cocked his head. Almost jumped at the way the hunger (which he'd trained himself so diligently to ignore) flared in his stomach. "Uhm... I could eat, yeah," he confirmed hesitantly.

Bad squinted skeptically at him, but pushed off the wall anyway. "Okay," he muttered, then straightened up. "Well, you finish getting ready in here and I'll whip up something for you. And fix those sleeves, please."

Wilbur flushed, hands flying to his elbows. "Yes, sir," he replied hurriedly. Bad disappeared into the kitchen again.

Once finished, Wilbur went out into the kitchen, still fussing over the cuffs of his sleeves. "You're all good to go?" Bad asked from his post at the cooktop.

Wilbur gave a timid "Yes," lingering in the doorway to the staff room.

Bad turned to look at him, then smiled. "Looking good, 'bur," He said, loud and encouraging. Then with a melancholy smile, handed the boy a plate - a pastrami sandwich and a handful of fries. "Here, I threw this together for you real quick. Eat up."

Eyes saucer-wide, Wilbur took the plate with careful hands. Stood holding it awkwardly for a moment. "Bad, you didn't... I mean I-" he floundered, but Bad shook his head, just enough movement to shift his bangs against his forehead. Wilbur hummed again, self-soothing rather than actually responding. "Thank you."

Bad's eyes disappeared behind his smile. "No problem at all!"

Wilbur lingered, gaze flickering awkwardly around the room. "Uhm, do I..." He shifted his weight a few times, like he was going to leave but wanted to wait for instruction. Gestured towards the saloon doors with his head. "Do I have to eat it out there?"

Bad squinted at him for a moment, like whatever Wilbur was really trying to say was going over his head. Then his eyebrows jumped and his mouth dropped open. "Oh! Of course you can eat in here if you want to. Or in the staff room. Wherever you feel most comfortable."

"Okay." Wilbur nodded, unmoving. Looked around the room as though he hadn't hung out in there at least a dozen times before. "Can I stay in here with you?"

Bad nodded jerkily, scanning the room before pointing to a prep counter a few feet away with a spatula. It was mostly unused, housing only the staff microwave and a stack of manuals and cookbooks. "You can go sit over there if you want," he said turning back to the grill.

Wilbur began to walk towards the indicated prep counter, dragging his feet as he went. "You're sure?"

Bad nodded again, this time without looking at him. "Yeah. We don't really use that counter, but I'll still wipe it down after."

Wilbur contemplated a moment, then hoisted himself up onto the counter and set his plate on his lap. Ate his fries one by one as he watched Bad clean the grill again. "Bad?" he called, swinging his legs like a child. "Could you tell me a story?"

"A story?" Bad echoed over his shoulder with a laugh. It was light and airy, the furthest thing from dismissive Wilbur ever had the pleasure of hearing. Picking up his sandwich with a timid smile, Wilbur nodded. Bad shook his head affectionately, one hand on his hip, trading the spatula in his other hand for a cleaning brick. "Well, I guess I could..." he trailed off, feigning thought.

Wilbur wiggled excitedly in his seat, raising his chin after taking a bite out of his sandwich.

They filled the time before his shift with silly stories - more often than not about Phil - and hearty laughter. At one point Bad gave Wilbur some house-made cherry limeade to chase away the dryness of the sandwich. The teenager was trying not to choke on his drink as he laughed when Phil poked into the room. Wilbur had never sobered up faster. "Hey Wil, five minutes until clock-in," Phil said, voice soft. It sounded like a shaky, outstretched hand. Like Phil was reaching for a stray and he wasn't sure if he'd end up getting scratched.

Wilbur didn't like the idea of being Phil's stray. But who was he to bite the hand that fed him? "Yeah, Alright," came Wilbur's reply. Simple, but with enough bite to ensure that the man wouldn't try anything further.

Phil gave an uncertain nod, then disappeared back through the saloon doors.

Wilbur sat still a moment. Hummed in discontent and then hopped off the counter. Bad watched as he weaved between prep tables to put his dishes in the sink. "Wilbur," he called. The boy stopped in his tracks, straightened up, and turned to face Bad. The grill sizzled as he worked, throwing water down. "He's not upset with you. Or about you."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes, giving a reluctant nod. "...Okay." He snatched up a sharpie from the staff counter, scribbling his name across his styrofoam.

More water sizzled on the cooktop, the cleaning brick scrubbing loudly across it. "I don't think he could be if he wanted to."

Wilbur whirled around, drink sloshing in his cup. "What?"

Bad looked up from the spot he was cleaning on the grill. "What?"

The hand holding the sharpie dropped as Wilbur blinked at him. "What did you say?"

And Bad shrugged, gaze returning to the cooktop. "I didn't say anything, 'bur. Why, what did you think I said?"

Wilbur lingered, then shook his head as though to keep himself from buffering. "Nothing," he muttered, leaning into the little staff nook to leave his cup on the counter.

It wasn't until Wilbur was heading out that Bad gave a cheery, "Have a good shift, Wilbur!" He didn't seem too bothered by the lack of response that followed.

Wilbur almost held his breath with the effort to avoid Phil's gaze. His footsteps were almost completely silent as he crept around the back of the bar. Dialed in his employee pin and clocked in. Phil stood behind the bar, taking inventory at the far wall. He almost seemed like he wanted to look at Wilbur, like he was fighting his neck to keep his head facing forward. Like Wilbur was anything really worth looking at. But Wilbur didn't pay him any mind. Just made his way to the stock room to search for sanitizer and a rag.

It was just enough time for him to lift the weight off his chest and breathe. It should've been easy to bury himself in his work, to put his head down and keep on keeping on.

And then he was back. Wilbur busied himself wiping down the farthest possible table from Phil and working his way closer. He occasionally squinted across the room, curious but trying to be subtle. Bad turned on music in the kitchen, the faint melody fitting in naturally with the audible rhythm of his prep work. Neither Wilbur nor Phil acknowledged it.

They both carried on as usual until Wilbur reached the high-tops across from the bar. His shoulders had hiked up to his ears with anxiety, movements tense. His thoughts tangled together like a loose ball of yarn. "Why haven't you said anything?" he asked without shifting his attention.

Phil's gaze snapped up. "Hmm?"

"You haven't said anything." Wilbur dunked his rag in the bucket of cleaning solution and wrung it out, refusing to meet Phil's gaze. "We've been tiptoeing around each other for days and you haven't said anything."

Phil pointed at Wilbur with the hand still holding his clipboard, eyebrow raised. "I've only been tiptoeing because *you've* been tiptoeing," he jested in a lame attempt at humor. Wilbur didn't laugh. "No, but for real," Phil amended in a rush. "After you filled me in about your situation you withdrew so hard - I wasn't sure if it was because of something I did so I wanted to give you space if you needed it."

Wilbur stared at Phil a moment, brows furrowed, and the man froze. For the first time, it was Phil who looked like a deer caught in the headlights and not the other way around. "I did not withdraw," Wilbur said finally, in that borderline offended way that every teenager denies being caught doing something embarrassing.

Phil raised his eyebrows playfully. "You didn't speak to be for four days."

Shame pulsed warm and numb in Wilbur's shoulders. "No, that's not-"

"*Four days*, Wilbur!" It was loud, but Phil's lighthearted grin canceled out any bite it might have had.

"Well..." Wilbur trailed off, then laughed at the absurdity of his defense. "No, you're right, sorry," he conceded bashfully, finally letting himself smile. The anxiety in his shoulders dissipated easily at the sight of Phil's relief. "I just kind of assumed. That's my bad."

Phil shook his head lightly. "That's alright. It's not that big of a deal, Wil."

Wilbur shrugged, some of the lightness in the air around him evaporating. "It is to some people."

Phil tapped his pen idly against his clipboard. "Like who?"

"Just people." Wilbur shrugged. "People at school, people when I'm looking for jobs, social workers. Just people."

Phil hummed, unsatisfied and quietly fuming. "Well, they're assholes. Don't listen to them."

Wilbur raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Got some strong feelings there, huh Phil?"

"I guess so, huh?" the man grinned sheepishly.

Wilbur scrubbed for another minute, lips pursed, then paused. "Do you mind if I ask why?"

"I..." Phil huffed. Seemed to look through his clipboard for a moment before looking back to Wilbur. "I was a foster kid. So when I say it's nothing to be ashamed of, I mean it. It's not."

"No way!" It was bright, bordering on smug with the almost-smirk that Wilbur wore. "Golden boy Phil, a foster? Tell me about it," he attempted to tease.

Then Phil's smile pulled in a way that looked uncomfortable, almost hurt, brows pinching. "Maybe another time, Wil."

The shift in energy spiked Wilbur's anxiety. maybe he had misstepped or said something wrong or-

"Alright. Sorry if I've overstepped."

Phil relaxed with a light sigh, shoulders sagging the most minute amount. "You haven't crossed any lines, Wilbur. This is just..."

Just a little close to home. Wilbur nodded in understanding, only a little wounded. Wiped at a blemish on the table.

"Maybe another time, yeah?"

And Wilbur nodded again, more firm this time, throat bobbing. "Yeah, another time." He should've known. He should have *known*.

Phil sighed again, using the inhale to seemingly gather himself. "Well, customers should start coming in pretty soon. If you want, grab yourself a snack before the rush."

Another nod. Wilbur dropped his rag into the bucket and made his way back into the kitchen. "Thank you, Phil," he called over his shoulder, the heart in it only half there. Then the saloon doors swung shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

wow, a year later! sorry for disappearing for so long! a lot of life stuff has happened in the past year and it's made it kind of hard to write anything worth posting, but i finally managed to crank something out. hope you all enjoyed this chapter! let's see how long it takes me to get the next one out 😊

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